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SENSITIVE

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SUBJECT: EMBASSY/CONGEN TEAM VISITS DAK LAK, ASSESSES EXTENT OF
ETHNIC UNREST

REF: A) HCMC 0401 B) HCMC 0510 C) Hanoi 1007 D) HCMC 0147

11. (SBU) Summary: Embassy and ConGen poloffs discovered more questions than answers concerning reports of recent ethnic unrest (refs A and B), during an April 26-27 trip through the Central Highlands province of Dak Lak. While everyone from government officials to some of the protesters themselves acknowledged that the April 10 demonstrators used more violence than the Montagnard Foundation, Inc. (MFI) and other groups have admitted, it is still too early to gauge with any accuracy the overall level of violence on either side, the size of the demonstrations, or the numbers of dead, injured, and detained. Official GVN statistics are still wildly at variance with the figures cited by MFI. Also yet to be fully understood is the effectiveness of the GVN's response to the violence. SECV pastors confirmed, however, that there have not been special restrictions on religious activities following the demonstrations. At least some provincial leaders seemed convinced of a USG and UN role in the unrest, while local officials seemed surprised and unprepared for the level of anger they faced. Even more so than usual, this trip was tightly controlled by local officials, making it extremely difficult for poloffs to speak freely with anyone. Press coverage was heavy, with reports both on television and in the newspapers. Septel will report on the visit to Gia Lai Province on April 27-28. End summary.

12. (SBU) Dak Lak People's Committee Chairman Nguyen Van Lang condemned MFI founder Kok Ksor for "deceiving, coercing, and forcing" the demonstrators to participate in the demonstrations with promises of cash payments and resettlement in the U.S. He also criticized the U.S. for "harboring" Kok Ksor, an action he deemed inconsistent with U.S. recognition of the GVN. More troubling, however, was the way he sprinkled his commentary with wild conspiracy theories on the role of the U.S. and UN in fomenting the unrest, mentioning the previously planned visit by poloffs the same weekend as the demonstrations (ref C) and the "coincidental" presence of six UNESCO employees in the province at the same time. He chided poloffs for disavowing advance knowledge of the protests, noting that the information was on MFI's own website. (Note: The Embassy has not heard this line from officials in Hanoi.)

13. (SBU) To counter MFI's claims that the demonstrations were a "peaceful prayer vigil," Chairman Lang played for poloffs an edited videotape showing a group of more than 100 Montagnards armed with primitive weapons hurling stones at the police. (He said he would consider providing a copy of the videotape to ConGen.) He told poloffs he had gone out to address this particular group of protesters that morning to try to convince them to return to their homes, but they had hurled stones at him as well, actually hitting him in the hip. He also displayed a crude banner allegedly carried by one group of protesters. The banner, written in English, called for the establishment of an independent Dega state led by Kok Ksor, and demanded that the majority ethnic Kinh Vietnamese leave the Central Highlands.

14. (SBU) According to Chairman Lang, forty people were injured during the demonstrations in Dak Lak, including 16 police, but no one had died. (He claimed to have visited all of the injured in the hospital -- police as well as protesters.) He said "more than 10" people had been detained for criminal activities, but others had probably gone into hiding. He claimed that the protests, which lasted from early in the morning until midday, were confined to just three of the province's 13 administrative districts -- Krong Ana, Cu M'Gar, and Buon Ma Thuot City.

15. (SBU) In a separate meeting, the director of the largest hospital in Buon Ma Thuot told Poloffs his facility had treated 40 patients with minor injuries on Saturday, April 10. About 20 had arrived in roughly one group in the morning, with the remainder trickling in throughout the day. Doctors at the hospital treated 11 police officers, one of whom was seriously injured. Some had been transferred to local clinics after a few days, others had been released sooner. The hospital had also treated 22 demonstrators and seven apparently innocent passers-by. Most of the patients suffered injuries consistent with stones and other projectiles. The badly injured policeman had been beaten over the head with sticks.

16. (SBU) The People's Committee Chairmen in the districts of Krong

Ana, Krong Pak, and Cu M'Gar echoed many of Chairman Lang's accusations of U.S. complicity in the activities of the "terrorist" Kok Ksor, calling for his immediate extradition to Vietnam. Like the provincial Chairman, they warned poloffs that many local people were very angry with the U.S. and might be hostile to the presence of American diplomats -- some because they thought the U.S. had stirred up the unrest, and others because the American planes had not come to take them away. (Note: Both official and other sources have said at least some protestors believed they were going to be transported for resettlement to the U.S. End Note.) The district Chairman in Krong Ana noted that the demonstrations in his district had been small in scale, involving no more than 2,000 "gullible people" who had fallen for promises of cash and resettlement. The few injuries, all minor, had been the result of clashes among the ethnic minority protesters themselves. He promised harsh punishment for the organizers, but clemency for everyone else. The district Chairman in Krong Pak denied that any residents of his district were involved in the demonstrations.

17. (SBU) The district Chairman in Cu M'Gar said armed protesters had started attacking people and businesses in some of the communes in the district as early as 7:00 a.m. on Saturday. He and other district officials had personally tried to persuade the protesters to return to their homes, when the protesters suddenly attacked the police. The demonstrations were over by noon, with very few injuries on either side. The Chairman had no information on detentions, but said some people had gone into hiding. Police impounded approximately 100 tractors. Some local people had reportedly been promised that if they made it to Buon Ma Thuot, the U.S. Ambassador or the UN would take them to America. Others had allegedly been told that they needed to leave because the Kinh were going to kill them in their villages. One ethnic Ede resident of Cu M'Gar told poloffs he had seen a group of people passing through the village and decided to join them, without any clear idea of where they were going or what they were planning to do. When police stopped his group, he fought alongside some of the other protesters. After the protests, he said, he was held in detention for eight days.

18. (SBU) Driving to Cu M'Gar District, poloffs made an impromptu stop (but still with a large entourage) at a commercial area on the outskirts of Buon Ma Thuot, which turned out to be the location featured in Chairman Lang's videotape. The local police chief did not seem to be expecting poloffs, but brought them to meet with several shop owners in the neighborhood. Some recounted how they had fled immediately when they saw the protesters coming down the road throwing stones and attacking businesses. Others claimed that local Kinh residents had engaged in violent clashes with the demonstrators after police had done nothing to stop the rampage. When the police chief said the demonstrations had lasted just two hours, an elderly woman in the shop blurted out that it was really four.

19. (SBU) The police chief claimed to have had "at least one day's notice" of the protests, but was not at all clear on what precautions he had taken. Based on accounts from three injured police officers at a local clinic just down the road (including the officer who was seriously injured), police seem to have been overwhelmed by the size and intensity of the protests. One injured traffic policeman said there were just three of them on the road with rubber batons that morning, trying to stop 200 tractors. Another described an attack on the local police station, where many windows were broken and plaster was chipped above the door. While some officers had helmets and shields, others did not. The chief said that most of the protesters had eventually listened to reason and dispersed, but some had to be dealt with using unspecified additional measures. One police officer intimated that local people had helped to fight back the demonstrators. Several local residents said the same thing, noting that property owners had been forced to take matters into their own hands because the police were not doing anything to stop the violence. Speaking with local residents, it was obvious that some of the reports carried by MFI and other organizations were circulating in the community. One individual clearly believed the claim that government forces had beheaded children. Most seemed nervous and suspicious of government accounts. However, police and residents alike denied that troops stationed at an army camp near the clinic had played any role in crowd control.

110. (SBU) Several members (strictly protect) of the provincial representative board of the government recognized Southern Evangelical Church of Vietnam (SECV) also mentioned details similar to those reported by MFI, although it was unclear whether they had any particular basis for believing or disbelieving what they had heard. Meeting poloffs in a restaurant with six local government officials sitting at the next table, the board members were circumspect in their comments, citing economic frustration as a major cause of the demonstrations and blaming "ill intentioned people" for inciting the violence. They had heard reports that some of the protests were peaceful until police intervened, but others had been violent from the start. While police had not used weapons against the protesters, many Kinh business owners and residents had. Inevitably, some people had been injured and some detained, with perhaps four to five still in custody pending further investigation. Others had fled into hiding. The board

members thought the demonstrations were larger than those in 2001, with many Christians participating, although the basis for this view was not clear. They confirmed that there had been no restrictions on religious activities in the aftermath of the protests, however.

11. (SBU) More generally, the pastors noted that they had just submitted a list of 50 preachers (one quarter of the total number for the province) for training at a new bible school (ref D), which was still under government consideration. These 50 had studied in secret after the closure of the Nha Trang Seminary in 1976, and the short-term training course was a way to regularize their status and make them acceptable to both the GVN and the SECV. They said the government had promised to facilitate the construction of real church buildings for the five registered churches in the province. Three already had permission to build, but were held back by a lack of funds. The pastors remained resigned to the slow process of recognition, one church at a time.

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12. (SBU) While we may never have accurate numbers for those who participated in the demonstrations, or were injured, killed, or detained, this trip provided our first opportunity to view the terrain where the largest protests occurred, and to try to put together the various pieces of the puzzle. Unfortunately, our caravan of seven escort vehicles carrying government officials, police, and at least a half dozen members of the press made truly open inquiry impossible, except for occasional brief encounters. From our Monday flight to Buon Ma Thuot, where poloffs and our two FSN assistants were given an extra degree of attention, to the scolding we received from a local official as we crossed the border to Gia Lai on Tuesday, our hosts tried to keep us to the program they had arranged. With the exception of the impromptu stop on the outskirts of Buon Ma Thuot, they largely succeeded. When we tried to stop at a village in Krong Pak, we were blocked by a group of men in civilian clothes who knew that this village was not on our program. When we drove down a side road en route to Gia Lai and were stopped by a police car that seemed to come out of nowhere, we were again told it was not on our program. When we stopped to talk to a local villager, a dozen young men materialized from the brush yelling at us in what appeared to be an ethnic minority language. The GVN was also clearly looking at this as an important press opportunity, going so far as to print a full page article in one of the nation's highest circulation newspapers reporting on the meeting with Chairman Lang, even after poloff's had made it clear that journalists were not allowed in the meeting. (Note: Trips to the Central Highlands, when allowed at all, are often restricted in a similar manner, especially during periods of heightened tensions, although the number of "escorts" this time was higher than usual and the press coverage was significantly more.)

13. (SBU) The only "facts" that seem to be established at this point are that at least some of the protests were violent, but they do not appear to have been extremely large or widespread. Other details will be harder to establish. How high would the level of ethnic animosity and/or desire for any of the benefits reportedly promised need to be to drive ethnic minority villagers to this kind of violence? Local officials really did seem surprised by the anger of the crowds, and their unwillingness to listen to reason. The financial lure of social security and green cards appears to have played a role. And how important a factor was religion? Most reports from official and other sources focus on land and other economic issues as the main source of discontent, and religious practice seems to have been unaffected the very next day, but religion may well have been part of the mix, at least for some. Answers to these questions will be slow in coming, along with a better understanding of how the protests were coordinated and organized. It will also take time to sort out the details of the government's response. If the casualty figures are as low as the GVN would have us believe, then restraint seems to have been the order of the day. But if a stronger response was required to quell the disturbance, then higher figures could be closer to the real number. And we do not know how many protestors are still in detention.

14. (SBU) We did hear a number of recurring themes throughout the trip, such as claims of Montagnards clashing with other Montagnards, Montagnards clashing with Kinh, and police dressing in civilian clothes to make the clashes look like Montagnards against Kinh. Other stories seemed more bizarre, like the accounts we heard from several officials in different districts that elderly, paralyzed people had been loaded on tractors and forced to join the protesters, later requiring treatment in the hospital. In a country where the government is generally suspicious of the people and the people are often equally suspicious of their government, it is not surprising that both sides might be willing to believe the worst. And in a region with poor communications and transportation infrastructure, rumors can easily become the coin of the realm. Even with all of the restrictions, this was a useful trip. Sadly, the suspicions voiced by the Dak Lak PC Chairman about USG and UN involvement are likely to be taken seriously among a large number of local and even some national GVN officials. Mission will remind national

leaders that they have a responsibility to dispel ridiculous
conspiracy theories.
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